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DE RUEHMO #1729/01 1691254  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 171254Z JUN 08  
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8641  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 001729

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/17/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: A FIRST LOOK AT MEDVEDEV'S REGIONAL POLICY

REF: VLADIVOSTOK 00058

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Regional policy and center-periphery relations have not enjoyed primacy of place for President Medvedev thus far, as the new president focuses on judicial reform; his anti-corruption campaign; and building a team of supporters in Moscow. Events on the ground, however, could force him to take a more assertive stance. Over the past week, rumors about Moscow plans to strip the "presidential" moniker for the heads of the national republics has led to sharp words from Yeltsin-era warhorse and United Russia co-chair, Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaymiev, against the "Putin" system of appointing regional elites, rather than having direct elections. Given the challenges facing the center's agenda for promoting political and economic development in the regions, Medvedev is likely to be drawn into regional issues -- an area in which he may chose to differentiate himself from his predecessor. End Summary.

Not Much to Go On  
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¶2. (SBU) Despite the theorizing about the significance of cadre appointments at the federal level as a tool for understanding the relative balance of power in the tandem government, our contacts have had little to say about Medvedev's policies toward the regional leadership. In part, that reflects a clear lack of evidence. Unlike Putin, whose opening gambit as President limited the influence of regional elites on federal policy by removing the governors from the Federal Council and establishing "viceroys" (Polpreds) to supervise local politics, Medvedev has paid little attention to regional issues in his first month in office, despite his early active role as candidate promoting the National Projects.

¶3. (SBU) From all indications, Putin took care in his last months in office to clear regional deadwood, replacing governors in Irkutsk, Arkhangelsk, and Ryazan before handing power to his successor. Most of the remaining governors still have time to serve before their mandates expire, with the expectation that any wholesale change in regional cadre policy to come only in late 2009 or early 2010. At the same time, he signed a decree transferring responsibility for overseeing the evaluation of "effectiveness criteria" for governors to the White House, inserting himself into the evaluation process. Many here interpreted Putin's efforts as carving out an influential position vis-a-vis the governors at Medvedev's expense. At the same time, Putin's last ditch activities as President provided Medvedev a breathing space to turn his attention to other issues, leaving regional politics to continue largely on their own momentum. (The notable exception has been the criminal investigations around the governors Sergey Darkin of Primorskiy Krai and Amur Oblast, which most analysts link to the anti-corruption mood in Moscow vice any question of center-regional relations (reftel)).

14. (C) Oksana Goncharenko of the Center for Current Political Affairs suggested that Medvedev's reticence to tackle regional issues may be a reflection of his very weak "bench" of supporters who he could appoint to fill gubernatorial positions. She noted that his first appointment, picking Valeriy Gayevskiy to replace Aleksandr Chernogorov as Stavropol governor, was made at the behest of Minister for Regional Development Dmitriy Kozak and said she does not consider Gayevskiy a "Medvedev man." Stavropol regional representative to the Federal Government, Aleksey Bednov, agreed with that assessment and noted that Gayevskiy came from the same Komsomol background as the other top regional elite. Bednov claimed that the new governor had worked well with Kozak when he served as Putin's polpred to the Southern district. Goncharenko pointed out that Gayevskiy's appointment contrasts with the broader trend of seeding "outsiders" into the governor's chair as a means of insuring fealty to Moscow over the interests of regional elites and industrial-finance groups -- such as Putin's appointment of non-locals Vladimir Artyakov in Samara and Igor Esipovich in Irkutsk.

#### Shaymiev Speaks Out

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15. (SBU) Events this week could push Medvedev to involve himself in regional issues more directly. The catalyst for change may be the unexpected criticism from one of the most influential regional voices, Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaymiev about Putin's policy of "appointing" governors to office. In public comments to the Tenth Worldwide Congress of the Russian Press on Saturday, Shaymiev called for return to the direct election of governors and he criticized the legislation that authorizes the President to dismiss any regional parliament that refuses to approve the Kremlin's choice for governor.

16. (SBU) Shaymiev's comments followed the June 9 publication on the Gazeta.ru website of an article, claiming that the Tatarstan legislature would be voting to approve changes to the region's constitution to give greater authority to the regional prime minister and eliminate the office of president. Shaymiev's administration reacted quickly to dismiss the allegations, but apparently the issue continues to percolate. Initial assessments here viewed the controversy as a result of wrangling for position within the Tatarstan elite, with Shaymiev's call for a return to elections as a ploy to hold onto power. But, that regional in-fighting has already shaped the political discourse in Moscow.

17. (C) In the background, there are expectations that Medvedev will reverse Putin's regional policy and endorse the election of governors. The head of the Public Chamber's Commission on Regional Development Vyacheslav Glazychev sees Putin as putting economic growth before institutions and Medvedev taking the opposite approach - recognizing that institutions themselves help to facilitate development. Aleksey Kara-Murza of the Union of Right Forces (SPS) argued to us that only by returning to democratic institutions can Russian federalism function and he voiced his hopes that Medvedev will make the right decisions.

18. (SBU) United Russia Duma Deputy Andrey Isaev publicly dismissed Shaymiev's criticisms, noting that his party still holds great respect for Tatarstan President as one of the founders of United Russia, but sees no need for a change in regional policy. Yet, according to the head of the Duma's Committee for Constitutional Legislation and State Building, Vladimir Pligin, the issue has already been a topic for inter-party discussions. Pligin reinforced that there were no immediate plans, however, for making the change and suggested 2012 as a possible target date for a reform of regional policy, according to press reports. Pligin's timeline corresponds with pre-inauguration comments reportedly made by Medvedev to Civil Forces leader Mikhail Barshevskiy, recognizing the need for a return to direct

elections, but arguing that Russia still needed the short-term stability that presidential appointments provided.

Comment

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19. (SBU) Given recent events, Medvedev's breathing space for dealing with regional issues may be smaller than he first considered, although he seems well-positioned to ride out any turbulence caused by Shaymiev's comments. Although he has not yet publicly reacted to Shaymiev's comments, there is an expectation among some Kremlin analysts that Medvedev will seek to differentiate himself from Putin's "vertical of power" approach. Putin's hasty moves to replace some of the weakest governors and his last minute decree, giving the White House authority for managing the "effectiveness criteria" for governors, helped to give Medvedev some maneuvering room, but also suggest that Putin plans to play a central role in managing center-periphery relations. As of yet, it is too soon to see how Medvedev's regional policy will develop or how those authorities will be divided amongst the tandem.

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